



Shields works with GMU alum Billy Smith

Susan Shields

Bringing a modern mind to ballet

As a dancer Susan Shields radiated a beauty that drew Mikhail Baryshnikov, Mark Morris, and Lar Lubovitch to work with her. As a choreographer she won the 2006 Choo-San Goh Award for Choreography and was described by The Washington Post as one of DC's "best-kept secrets." As a teacher, she gives classes distinguished by her graciousness, musicality, and inventive phrasing. A professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA, for 12 years, Shields coaxes dancers to explore the unknown in all of her courses, from ballet to modern to improvisation. Kate Mattingly spoke with Shields after her ballet class about where she came from and how she guides students forward at the university level.

Tell me about some of your early mentors. Growing up in Virginia, close to DC, I studied with Mary Day at The Washington Ballet for four or five years. She taught me not just about finished lines but about how you got there. At SUNY Purchase, Kazuko Hirabayashi gave me her blessing when I transitioned from ballet into modern and left Purchase for Lar Lubovitch's company. A good teacher knows when to let a student go. As a teacher now, I see how crucial that moment was.

What did you learn from Lar Lubovitch and Mark Morris (who also danced with Lubovitch) that you apply to your teaching? I was always inspired by the way Lar connected steps. When I teach, especially ballet, I go for the same kind of organic transitions. Also from Lar, I learned musical sensitivity,

letting the music carry you away. Working with Mark, I loved how he emphasized *his* rhythm. I do this today when I tell students they don't have a choice about timing; they need to work with the timing I set. Mark also had a sense, like Balanchine, of "What are you waiting for? Do it now!" I stress that urgency with my students, particularly freshmen or sophomores who think they can wait until junior or senior year to start growing as artists. I urge them to focus on developing *now*.

Watching you teach, I notice the intricate phrasing of your center combinations. Can you talk about your creative process? Rhythm is huge for me. I start by singing and finding a rhythm, then I make movement to it. For some exercises, like a waltz combination, I always integrate a *développé croisé*, an *écarté*, and an arabesque. The choreography becomes the moments connecting those lines.

My center combinations are intended to give a sense of *dancing*. Especially in college, when students are also taking modern classes, some start to reject ballet. I pull them toward seeing ballet as just another way of using the body, creating organic movement. They delight in that.

Sometimes you offer alternate names for steps, like "soar around" for an arabesque turn. Why? I want to get students away from preconceived ideas about ballet steps. I also like to use "look, look" for a *fouetté* and "grapevine" for a *faille*. It encourages them to think about the physicality of the movement.

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How do you see the impact of competition dancing on students' technique?

Competitions reward an aesthetic that's sassy, in-your-face, show-offy. But dance is about sharing, not showing off.

Students who have done well in competitions fall into the trap of thinking their technique is perfect, when there are many aspects of being an artist that they need to discover. They've been taught that when they win, they are at a peak. They haven't yet seen that learning is life-long.

Why teach ballet to students who will not end up in ballet companies?

I did a ballet barre before every modern performance, and I was injury-free my entire career. I think there is a sense of body awareness achieved through ballet, a sense of elegance. And it's part of being versatile. When I create works on ballet companies, I expect the dancers to be able to move from their thoracic or abdomen or pelvis. Most modern dancers know how to drop their weight, but what if they're asked to lift from their abdomen or rib cage? Choreographers like Karole Armitage and Stephen Petronio expect that range.

What's the idea behind your Senior Synthesis course at GMU?

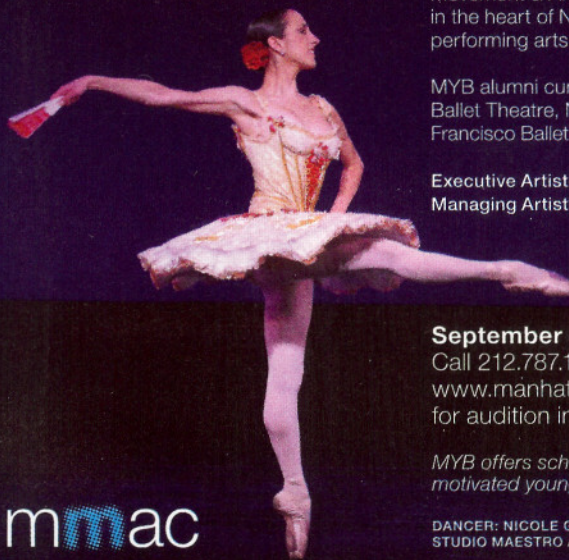
It provides a connection between college dance and the world that seniors are about to enter; it gives them time to reflect. Why are they dancing? Why choose to make art in today's society? I always notice that in their technique classes, they become more curious, more appreciative of their teachers, and more responsible for their own training. They start to define their aesthetics and feel confident about stepping into the professional world.

When you say "find your metaphor" during class, what is it that you want students to find?

College dance places so much emphasis on somatics and movement analysis. These are hugely important, but I think the student's real job is to be an artist. I tell them, "If you are in love, if you are sad, bring those qualities to your dancing. These experiences are in your body. You can let it come out through dance." I know we are in a post-modern world, and we are supposed to be neutral. But we are people and we live and we feel. I want poetry. ■

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